

A JOURNEY TO THE POSTMODERN  
CAPITAL OF THE AMERICAN WEST:  
HUNTER S. THOMPSON'S  
*FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS*

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ABSTRACT

The following article examines Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) both in terms of its revelatory value to the peculiar nature of Las Vegas and also as major literary testimony to the symbolic role of this city as a microcosm of the New West and of contemporary America. It is also argued that most Las Vegas writing, as exemplified by Thompson's book, has often overlooked the multiple ingredients and complexity of Las Vegas life to focus on the archetypal image of this city as the incarnation of vice, artificiality, chaos, and excess in postmodern America.

KEY WORDS: Western American literature, New West, city writing, Las Vegas, postmodernism, Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, "gonzo" journalism, American Dream.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza la obra de Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), centrándose en su poder para retratar las características peculiares de Las Vegas y su condición de símbolo del Nuevo Oeste y de la América contemporánea. Se destaca además que el relato de Thompson, al igual que otras populares obras sobre Las Vegas publicadas en las últimas décadas, ha contribuido a la extensión de una imagen arquetípica de esta ciudad, convertida en la encarnación del pecado, la artificialidad, el caos y el exceso en la América postmoderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura del oeste norteamericano, Nuevo Oeste, literatura urbana, Las Vegas, postmodernismo, Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, periodismo "gonzo," sueño americano.



The road of excess leads to the palace  
of wisdom.

William BLAKE — *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793)

Since the end of the 1960s the extraordinary development of quality western writing, led by such well-known authors as Wallace Stegner, Cormac McCarthy, Barbara Kingsolver, Leslie Marmon Silko, Edward Abbey, Larry McMurtry, Maxine Hong Kingston, Rudolfo Anaya, Marilyn Robinson, and many others, has brought increasing recognition to the American literary West. This new significance of western writing has put an end to traditional misleading and stereotyped views that used to identify the literature of the American West almost exclusively with “formula westerns” and Hollywood horse operas. One of the signs that the western literary field has been reinvigorated is the increasing attention to the role of the cities in the New West. In fact, new western writing offers unique portraits of the complexity of contemporary western cities that testify to the gradual maturation of the urban perspective of the West. The new visibility of western city writing, represented by the remarkable success of such authors as Joan Didion, Raymond Carver, James Ellroy, Ishmael Reed, Lucha Corpi, T.C. Boyle, and Sherman Alexie, to name just a few, has brought growing attention to the city landscape as a fundamental feature of the New West. Actually, recent western literature includes illuminating approaches to the interconnection between the city, its residents, and its visitors, or to use Ihab Hassan’s words, to the city as “concept, project, field, magic lantern through which the human condition may be viewed” (94).

One of the most interesting traits of postfrontier writing is the consolidation of the urban novel as a major subgenre, with distinctive settings such as Los Angeles, Seattle, and Las Vegas. In particular, the singularity of Las Vegas, “the most mythic, if not mystic, of all American cities” (Hausladen 15), has attracted the attention of many contemporary authors, who have often regarded this city as the capital of the postmodern West and as an icon of the growth of the New West. Certainly, the term “new” may be problematic when applied to the West that emerges in the postwar period, a complex and heterogeneous territory where traditional cowboy culture and economy coexist with industrialization and the expansion of metropolitan areas in major Southwestern cities. In fact, as Neil Campbell has observed, “the New West fuses old and new creating something different, ... within an increasingly hybridized cultural space” (132). Anyway, it may be argued that the extension of urban uniformity and the increasing influence of technology in the New West have emphasized the growing loss of the traditional sense of place and proximity to the land, contributing to the development of postmodern placelessness in this region, as exemplified by Las Vegas. This city also symbolizes the recreational function of the New West and one of the main ingredients in tourism: the search for unique, distinguished places, often associated with a supposed golden era in remote countries. As Leonard Lutwack has written, “when notable places cannot be made available, they may be faked in the construction of primitive, antique, and futuristic sites: wildlife compounds, Disney World amusement parks, and business



establishments that masquerade as exotic wonderlands” (229). In Las Vegas’ case, “the greatest bargain destination on the planet” (Konik 35), its millions of visitors are offered an artificial reproduction of the most significant locations of such distinguished cities as Cairo, Rome, Paris, Venice, and New York. In the following I argue that most Las Vegas writing not only overlooks the ordinary lives of its inhabitants, but also the multiple recreational dimensions of the city, to center on gambling-stimulated tourism, with an emphasis on the archetypal image of this city as the incarnation of vice, artificiality, chaos, and excess in postmodern America. Particular attention is paid to Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) both in terms of its revelatory value to the uniqueness of Las Vegas and also as a major literary testimony to the symbolic role of this city as a microcosm of the New West and of contemporary America.

In the second half of the twentieth century Las Vegas replaced Reno as the nation’s main gambling center and wedding and divorce capital. In fact, a few years after the end of World War II the reputation of Las Vegas as the “new sin city” was widely extended throughout the country. By the end of the 1960s publicly traded corporations entered the gambling scene and the distorted “Mob” image of Las Vegas began to be tempered. In the last decades of the century federal funding and the impressive development of gambling-related tourism helped Las Vegas’s astonishing growth. Thus, its population jumped from 124,000 in 1970 to 478,000 in 2000 (actually, the whole metropolitan area had more than 1,563,000 residents by the end of the century). Las Vegas has not only become the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States, but also an international major tourist attraction. As Sally Denton and Roger Morris have contended, “the city’s luminance draws a world. More than 50 million people journey to it every year. Only Mecca inspires as many pilgrims... Nearly half of America has been there, more than any other locale in the nation” (7). The increasing popularity of Las Vegas as a tourist resort has also been favored by a series of remarkable innovations introduced in the city’s entertainment industry. In fact, since the late 1980s Las Vegas has undergone an important metamorphosis, becoming a city loaded with family-oriented theme park hotel-casinos, a sort of Disneyland in the desert. Although the city still offers a wide array of adult pleasures and its position as the major American adult playground remains safe, this reorientation in its entertainment focus, together with the extension of legalized gambling to other states of the nation, has tempered the commonly held view of Las Vegas as aberrant (Land and Land 15). Last but not least, Las Vegas has been increasingly celebrated as the greatest business success story of the twentieth century, as “a prime Wall Street investment, a shrine to which the most famous politicians of both governing parties make their obligatory pilgrimage for anointing and finance, a realization of the American dream” (Denton and Morris 8).

According to Hal Rothman and Mike Davis, “no city in American history has ever changed its clothes as frequently and rapidly as Las Vegas... Reinvention has been the essence of the place” (1). Certainly, Las Vegas has often shifted its identity since its foundation in 1905 and the multiple faces of Las Vegas have been particularly evident in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In fact, Las Vegas has come





to epitomize the New West, due to its complex and shifting features, becoming a postmodern city “that refutes any single design principle or metanarrative, like Disneyland, but rather echoes the New West in its pluralist evolution, its constant reinvention, and its attachment to the road itself from which it grew” (Campbell 157-8). Despite these continuous shifts of identity and the alleged purification of the last two decades, much of contemporary Las Vegas writing still retains a great deal of the sensational and sordid elements that have shaped the public’s image of Las Vegas since the end of World War II. Actually, several of the works published in the last four decades, and in some cases their film adaptations too, have contributed to reinforce the negative stereotype of Las Vegas. Thus, books such as Nicholas Pileggi’s *Casino* (1995), Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *Play It as It Lays* (1970), Larry McMurtry’s *The Desert Rose* (1983), John O’Brien’s *Leaving Las Vegas* (1990), John Gregory Dunne’s *Vegas: A Memoir of a Dark Season* (1974), James Ellroy’s *The Cold Six Thousand* (2001), and Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969), *Inside Las Vegas* (1977), and *The Last Don* (1996), have obtained widespread attention, consolidating in the popular imagination the image of Las Vegas as a cultural aberration and as a metaphor for everything that is superficial and artificial in the New West and in contemporary America. In most cases there is an overemphasis on the sin and vice features traditionally associated with Las Vegas and its libertarian laws, focusing on the themes of gambling, crime, drugs, and prostitution.

One of the most influential books for the consolidation of the Las Vegas negativist image during the last decades of the twentieth century has been Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*.<sup>1</sup> Although this book defies placement within a specific genre and its connection with the so-called “New Journalism” still remains controversial,<sup>2</sup> we cannot deny the similarities between Thompson’s book and some of the best-known pieces traditionally associated with this genre such as Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* (1968), or Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), to name just a few works. Thompson shares with the authors of these books the subordination of the journalistic contents of the text to a common aim, to “create an aesthetic experience embodying the author’s personal experience and interpretation of the subject” (Hellman 25). However, Thompson’s approach to his topic is unique because in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he resorts to his famous “gonzo” style, an extreme version of new journalistic techniques, where self-conscious parody and excessive, flamboyant accounts become major ingredients. This type of journalism has been defined as “the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages the audience. It is Point

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<sup>1</sup> *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* originally appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine in two instalments in 1971 and a year later it was published in book form (New York: Random House). In 1998 Thompson’s book was adapted into the film of the same name directed by Terry Gilliam and starring Johnny Depp and Benicio del Toro.

<sup>2</sup> Even some critics completely disagree with the use of the label “journalistic” to refer to Thompson’s writing (Kennedy xix).

of View Run Wild” (Filiatreau 7). Although Thompson himself claimed that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was just a failed attempt to write gonzo journalism because he violated one of its rules (the avoidance of any revision at all), the book certainly fulfils other basic characteristics of gonzo journalism, especially the participation of the author as the focus of the story (McKeen 49-50). It is a text that breaks traditional genre barriers, a combination of journalism and narrative non-fiction that is difficult to categorize. The book has been classified as nonfiction, as a novel, or even as a travelogue. Thompson himself often insisted on the artificial nature of the distinction between fiction and journalism. He rejected both standard journalism and realistic fiction to emphasize the power of imagination. In the book Thompson employs a fictional framework on a piece of journalism to break the conventional barriers between fiction and non-fiction, shocking the reader who “is never sure whether he is experiencing extraordinary fact or extraordinary fantasy” (Hellman 73). Whether fiction or fact, the truth is that, as William McKeen has stated, “the book certainly *reads* like fiction” (50).

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is basically the author’s confession of his failure to fulfill two magazine assignments dealing with two completely different events in Las Vegas in 1971: the Fourth Annual “Mint 400” motorcycle desert race and the National Conference of District Attorneys Seminar on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. In the book the drug-soaked journey to Las Vegas of Raoul Duke (Thompson’s fictional counterpart) and his friend Dr. Gonzo (attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta) becomes a grotesque search for the American Dream at the end of the counterculture era. Admittedly, the book may be seen as an epitaph for the idyllic 1960s, for “all those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours, too” (Thompson, *Fear* 178). However, the book contains a wider meaning because it signals the decline of American culture and values and, above all, the corruption of one of its most widespread myths, the elusive American Dream: “Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas” (12). Actually, Thompson’s book may be defined as a literary parody of the archetypal quest for the American Dream. In fact, this quest soon becomes a mere survival trip, where his protagonist resorts to black humor to mock long-standing American values and archetypes, exposing them as self-deceptions. Thompson even inverts the traditional direction of such a quest (the historical movement toward the west), sending Duke and Dr. Gonzo east, from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, in what we may be seen as a symbol of the confusion of contemporary America and the artificiality of its main myths. It is also worth noting the peculiar name chosen by Thompson for the main protagonist of his book, Duke, a name many Americans in the 1970s associated with John Wayne, the cowboy emblem of the mythic West. However, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Duke is not an epic hero, loyal to the code of the mythic cowboy taming the West, but sort of a picaresque anti-hero, who abuses different kinds of drugs, while challenging both traditional American values and the countercultural dream of the 1960s.

The failure of the idealism of the 1960s and the illusory faith in the American Dream appear intertwined throughout most of Thompson’s book, as it is particularly evident in the following passage: “We had all the momentum; we were





riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave... So now, less than five years later, you can go on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark- that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (68). This passage resembles closely the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and, in fact, the book has been defined as “a countercultural *Gatsby*” (Sickles 61). Thomson himself in a later work, *Generation of Swine* (1988), referred to the last lines of *The Great Gatsby* as “some of the highest and purest and cleanest words ever written about the real beauty of what they were just beginning to call back then, the *American Dream*” (259). In *Generation of Swine* Thompson also mentioned Fitzgerald’s novel to emphasize his disillusionment with the myth of the American Dream from a contemporary perspective: “Between AIDS and acid rain, there is not much left of what Scott Fitzgerald called ‘a fresh green breast of the new world’” (258).

If *The Great Gatsby* has been often regarded as an epitaph for the 1920s, *Fear and Loathing* may be viewed as a proper epitaph for the 1960s. Actually, the book became an icon of the pop-culture, of an era past, in a time in which the innocence and optimism of the 1960s had been replaced by skepticism and cynicism. Although in *Fear and Loathing* Thompson shows his affection for the 1960s (even the book is dedicated to Bob Dylan for *Mister Tambourine Man*), it may be argued that this work is mainly a mocking portrait of those who tried to recreate the spirit of that decade and the hippy drop-out culture just through the music and drugs, principally LSD. It is grotesque to lay a 1960s journey in the seventies because the spirit of the sixties no longer existed in Nixon’s era. Thus, Duke and Dr. Gonzo appear to be outsiders who represent the counterculture movement and the drug culture. Although they seem to be located outside the dominant paradigm of their time, there is no nostalgia for the 1960s, a decade whose values, attitudes, and ideologies are often debunked by Duke. However, his criticism towards the 1970s, towards its materialism and conservatism is even harsher: “But what is sane? Especially here in ‘our own country’ —in this doomstruck era of Nixon. We are all wired into a *survival trip*. No more of the speed that fueled the Sixties” (178). The anachronistic condition of Duke and Dr. Gonzo’s journey is also enhanced by the main features of their final destination, Las Vegas. In fact, this city, in Duke’s view, seems to reproduce the spirit of the 1950s:

A week in Las Vegas is like stumbling into a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties. Which is wholly understandable when you see the people who come here, the Big Spenders from places like Denver and Dallas. Along with National Elks Club conventions (no niggers allowed) and the All-West Volunteer Sheepherders’ Rally. (156)

In Thompson’s book Las Vegas is mostly depicted as a modern-day Babylon, as the ultimate corruption of the American Dream. *Fear and Loathing* mocks Las Vegas and its promise of instant gratification in exchange for nothing: “Las Vegas is a society of armed masturbators/gambling is the kicker here/sex is extra/weird trip for high rollers... house-whores for winners, hand jobs for the bad luck crowd” (41). The book also exposes the meaning of the term “sin” associated to Las Vegas:

“In a closed society where everybody’s guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity” (72). In any case, Thompson does not intend only to put into question Las Vegas promises, but also the idea of the existence of the American Dream. In fact, the working title of *Fear and Loathing* was *The Death of the American Dream* (Clark 2). Certainly, Thompson does not include in his novel an explicit reference to the reason why his protagonists believe they will find the American Dream during their trip to Las Vegas. However, Las Vegas and its lure of all-expenses-paid become for Thompson the perfect embodiment of the false myth of the American Dream. Particularly remarkable is his mocking portrait of the average middle-class Americans, coming to Las Vegas in search of a dream that is no longer based on hard work:

They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they’re *real*, and, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a *lot* of them- still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (57)

Thompson’s parody of the American Dream and his exposure of the sorry condition of this myth reach their climax almost at the end of the book when a waitress and a cook give Duke and Gonzo directions to a club on the Northeast outskirts of Las Vegas called “The American Dream.” When they arrive at the place, they find only “a huge slab of crocked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds, [a place that] had burned down about three years ago” (168).

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson also focuses on the interaction between the illusory and artificial landscape of Las Vegas and the hallucinatory world where Duke and Gonzo are immersed due to their abusing different kinds of drugs: marijuana, mescaline, LSD, cocaine, ether... It is even possible to draw an analogy between the hallucinatory image of the American Dream offered by Las Vegas with its gambling tables and the promise of instant gratification that drugs are supposed to bring to the two main characters. Besides, the hallucinatory power of these drugs increases in the context of excess and artificiality provided to them by Las Vegas, a place where “reality itself is too distorted” (47). As John Hellman has noted, through these hallucinatory visions, “Thompson is able to present Las Vegas’s psychic dangers as physical ones” (76). In Thompson’s book the liminal space between reality and illusion often becomes a blurred line. The chemical hallucinations of the two main characters parallel the constant distortion of reality in the neon artifice and their freakish behavior seems to fit right in an insane city containing an excessive and often incongruous mix of forms and lifestyles:

Vegas is so full of natural freaks —people who are genuinely twisted— that drugs aren’t really a problem, except for cops and the scag syndicate. Psychedelics are almost irrelevant in a town where you can wander into a casino any time of the day or night and witness the crucifixion of a gorilla —on a flaming neon cross that suddenly turns into a pinwheel, spinning the beast around in wild circles above the crowded gambling action. (190)

The hallucinations of Gonzo and Duke and the artificiality of the Las Vegas landscape are portrayed against a background of real life news stories, often disturbing experiences concerning drive-by-shootings, car-jackings, thrill killers or the Vietnam War. Thompson resorts to these all-too-actual experiences to denounce the depravity and decadence of America in the Nixon era and to ridicule the “controlled excess” and the hallucinations of drugs offered under the neon of Las Vegas in comparison with the nightmares brought in from the outside world. Actually, in the book Thompson identifies Las Vegas with the establishment and with the counterrevolution of the 1970s, mocking the city as a paradise of freedom and opportunities: “This was Bob Hope’s turf. Frank Sinatra’s. Spiro Agnew’s” (44), “The Circus Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war” (46), “After five days in Vegas you feel like you’ve been here for five years. Some people say they like it- but then some people like Nixon, too. He would have made a perfect Mayor for this town; with John Mitchell as Sheriff and Agnew as Master of Sewers” (193)... Thus, Thomson unmaskes the Las Vegas mythos, emphasizing its illusory condition and the power of the House (a symbolic reference to the establishment control) in a place where, above all, the visitor should “calm down [and] learn to *enjoy* losing” (57).

Thompson’s mocking portrait of the countercultural dreams of the sixties and his undermining of the rising conservatism of the seventies may make *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* appear as a modernist morality tale on the end of the American Dream. Certainly, modernity and postmodernity coexist in this text, at least to a certain extent, as it also happens in other books of the era that represent the transition from declining modernist structures to emergent postmodern paradigms (DeKoven 14-18). Nevertheless, in this book postmodernism becomes the dominant literary modality, as illustrated, for example, by Thompson’s choice of formal strategies and their interaction with the setting of the story. Thus, in his depiction of Duke’s journey to Las Vegas, Thompson often moves away from realism, utilizing a series of postmodernist techniques that enhance Duke’s lack of orientation and his fragmented way of perceiving things. In fact, we may notice that Duke is often unable to tell the difference between what he is thinking and what he is saying. Thompson’s book is basically a disjunctive narrative, filled with short sentences, ellipses, and brief, disconnected, bizarre episodes. These episodes often contain images of alienation and desolation that illustrate postmodern placelessness. Overall, the disordered and broken pattern of Thompson’s narrative may be viewed as a very effective way to convey not only Duke’s disorientation, but also the chaotic quality of postmodern American society and the complexity and contradictions of the New West, whose ultimate artificial nature is represented in particular by such a peculiar urban space as Las Vegas, a “harbinger of postmodern American inauthenticity” (DeKoven 107). Actually, Thompson’s multiple and ruptured narration and its frantic pace suggest the dislocation of the Las Vegas scene and its surreal condition, emphasizing the power of this city to undermine our sense of reality. Related to this, it is worth remembering that another postmodernist western writer, Joan Didion, once defined Las Vegas in the following way:





Las Vegas is the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion to immediate gratification... Almost everyone notes that there is no "time" in Las Vegas, no night and no day and no past and no future...; neither is there any logical sense of where one is, ...what happens there has no connection with "real" life. Nevada cities, like Reno and Carson, are ranch towns, Western towns, places behind which there is some historical imperative. But Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder. All of which makes it a very stimulating and interesting place, but an odd one. (*Slouching* 90-91)

Another remarkable postmodernist aspect of Thomson's style in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is his use of technology, particularly the tape recorder, a device that he employs to transfer his transcriptions. In a postmodern world technology seems to replace paper as a reliable instrument to keep a record of experience. Thus, at the beginning of the book Duke's attorney insists on the importance of getting money for two basic purposes, "for drugs and a super-sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record" (9). However, later in the book it is hinted that technology does not guarantee a faithful record of experience because it may turn faulty. In fact, the transcription of Duke and his attorney's visit to an all-night diner in North Vegas ends because of garbled tape: "Tape cassettes for the next sequence were impossible to transcribe due to some viscous liquid encrusted behind the heads" (168).

Although it is a book about fear and loathing, it is worth mentioning Thompson's ability to portray these two feelings from a humorous perspective, resorting to parody and satirical devices to distance somewhat Duke, his narrating persona, from horror. This anti-hero works in the book as Thompson's self-caricature and becomes a useful instrument to convey his surrealistic view of contemporary experience. Thus, actual events and paranoid illusions intertwine in the book, contributing to a black humorist view of postmodern American society. In fact, due to his impressive command of parody Thompson has been called by Tom Wolfe "the 20th century's greatest comic writer in English" ("Gonzo" 1). Besides, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* humor is enhanced through the expressionist pen-and-ink drawings by the Welsh cartoonist Ralph Steadman. His images do represent gonzo as much as Thompson's words do. There is an emphasis on a particular aesthetics based on ugliness, with surreal and crude images suggesting the two main motifs of the books: fear and loathing.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* postmodernist formal strategies reinforce the surreal moments and scenes offered by Las Vegas, the paradigm of postmodernity. It is a setting that seems to offer an alternative to contemporary uniformity through its mixture of styles, forms, and histories. Even the architecture of the city symbolizes postmodernity due to its embracing of such features as spectacle, hyperrealism, thematization, simulacra, commodification, and fragmentation (Smith and Bugni 1-2). It is a place where chaos, unrestraint, vice, and sin seem to be overwhelmingly present and celebrated by its visitors. This archetypal image of Las Vegas as the incarnation of vice and almost unlimited freedom plays certainly a major role in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, though it is also hinted that this atmosphere of sin and permissiveness often coexists with a series of underlying powers that enforce



control and enclosed borders in this city. These simultaneous and contradictory elements of freedom and regulation, moral liberalism and repression, properly connect with the postmodernist celebration of ambiguity and hybridity in a city where real and virtual forms mix in odd and multiple ways.

Overall, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* testifies to the gradual maturation of the urban perspective of the West and the increasing attention to the postmodern symbolic contents of city landscapes in new western writing. The book also illustrates proper awareness of the uniqueness of Las Vegas and of its symbolic role as a microcosm of the general atmosphere of chaos and excess often associated with the New West and with contemporary urban America. After all, as H. Peter Steeves has noted, "Vegas is different. If this is the all-American city, then it has all of America's best and worst traits. And surely because of this, it looks like no other city in America" (132).

Certainly it may be argued that the Las Vegas portrayed by Thompson no longer exists. Even some critics, for example, Francisco Menendez, have defined it as "a romantic notion that no longer draws a crowd" (54). Besides, the widespread acceptance of gambling in contemporary America has also contributed to legitimate Las Vegas. However, the truth is that Thompson's book played an important role in the expansion of the popular perception of this city as a place of greed, artificiality, vice, and easy money. The book set the pace for a widespread fictional genre during the last decades of the twentieth century, the male adventure search for instant gratification in Las Vegas, a city often portrayed from a bleak perspective. In fact, most contemporary authors, including Thompson himself, have tended to stress the negative features of Las Vegas, reproducing archetypal fatalistic views about this myth of neon. They have often presented Las Vegas in an apocalyptic way, as a doomed place, whose corruption symbolizes America's way to self-destruction. In Ken Cooper's words,

...due in part to its close physical proximity to the Nevada Test Site, Las Vegas has become the nuclear-age Hollywood in fiction, with a diverse group of writers appropriating the vernacular of the city's culture: the neon artifice, Howard Hughes and his fear of radioactive fallout, the rigged roulette wheels and an invisible but omnipresent "House." In Las Vegas, these writers have found (and created) the place where all of us go to die, a microcosm of atomic roulette. (542-543)

Admittedly, the recurrent portrait of Las Vegas as a bastion of vice, greed, and organized crime may be somehow justified by the peculiar history of this city, in particular, by its libertarian reputation and its ties to the underworld. Similarly, the image of Las Vegas as an artificial, absurd, and chaotic realm reflects the singular atmosphere of this city, a place that, after all, is filled with volcanoes, castles, canals and pyramids. However, it is always risky to oversimplify the nature of such a complex city as Las Vegas. As Ken Cooper has stated, "because Las Vegas has such distinctive connotations for millions of Americans who have never been there, it may be inferred that our apprehension of the city frequently (or even predominantly) occurs in the realm of cultural discourse. Not only does the city mean something, but we have made that meaning" (529-530). Actually, a lot of contem-



porary authors writing about Las Vegas have paid more attention to the Las Vegas mythos than to the reality of the city itself. They have focused on Las Vegas as a symbol of the corrupted nature of the American Dream, employing this city to offer a bleak portrayal of the dislocation of American values and culture. This overemphasis on the “sin” image of Las Vegas as a sleazy place populated by criminals, gamblers, and prostitutes has often overshadowed in contemporary writing fundamental characteristics of modern Las Vegas, such as its role as a family vacation spot, the ordinary lives of its residents, or its rich multicultural aspects (Rfo 461). Actually, the multiple ingredients and complexity of Las Vegas present-day city life still lack a proper fictional representation. Only a few contemporary and not very well-known authors, such as Phyllis Barber (*Parting the Veil: Stories from the Mormon Imagination*, 1999), Hart Wegner (*Off Paradise: Stories from Las Vegas*, 2001), David Kranes (*Keno Runner*, 1989), H. Lee Barnes (*The Lucky*, 2003), and Charles Bock (*Beautiful Children*, 2008), have shown their ability to transcend the Las Vegas myth to focus on the multiple and hybrid features of this city, to deal with Las Vegas as a real place, instead of writing about a mythologized world outside reality.

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